

## European Alliance Group

### Resilience and solidarity are key in months ahead

Resilience and solidarity, more so than ever before, are needed across the EU in the next few months as European regions and cities continue the massive task of organising vaccination programmes. It is apt that this is happening in spring, the season of new beginnings, the season of growth and, with that, hope.

The battle with the pandemic is, of course, not over yet and there are still many challenges ahead of us. In the first place, we need to find a fine balance between, on the one hand, the measures we need to take to limit the spreading of the virus as much as possible, and on the other, the strong need of many of our businesses to go back to work and the long-awaited wish of our citizens to go back to normal life and to enjoy their social life and freedom of movement.

We also need to look towards recovery and ensure that it is felt across all sectors of society. It is our belief that regional and local government needs to be to the forefront of national recovery and resilience plans.

As a group we have organised events focusing on the challenges of recovery in the post pandemic period. Most recently we have explored the impact on tourism and on regional airports. Our members are continuing to focus on topics ranging from green recovery to rural revival, from smart specialisation to SME development, from Cohesion Policy to urban policy – to name but a few. We will continue pushing these positive priorities for the benefit of our regions.



Cllr Kieran McCarthy

As a group, we have also being a strong advocate of the importance of cross-border co-operation. The PEACE programme is vital to ensure cross-community project development in Northern Ireland and to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. This is the reason why in February we organised a very interesting event “Preserving ‘PEACE’ on the island of Ireland” with Gina McIntyre, which we will cover more in this newsletter.

Finally, we hope to see the launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe on 9 May. We commit to be actively involved with this process and in particular ensure that it leads to real benefits and tangible outcomes for the local and regional government and citizens. It needs to be a truly bottom up approach and our enthusiastic group are best placed to provide clear and understandable input into the discussions.

Stay safe to everyone,

Kieran

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### Mikel Irujo appointed Minister of Economic and Business Development of Navarre

On 4 February, our SEDEC commission coordinator Mikel Irujo Amezaga was appointed Minister of Economic and Business Development in the Government of Navarre.

Mr Irujo has rich academic and professional experience in politics and European affairs. In addition to holding a PhD in European law and doing additional postgraduate studies in Brussels, he has also served as a Member of the European Parliament,

Head of the Delegation of Navarre in Brussels and Director General for Foreign Action in the Government of Navarre.

Mr Irujo has been a member of the CoR since 2016 and during this time drafted opinions on several topics, including Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3) and regional innovation. He is currently doing a report on the future EU Action Plan on Social Economy.



Mr Mikel Irujo Amezaga

"In these turbulent times of uncertainty due to BREXIT, it is worth paying attention to the successes of the PEACE and Interreg programmes and what they have achieved in Ireland, Northern Ireland and beyond."

*Cllr Kieran McCarthy, president of the EA group*

## Moldovan local authorities call for greater cooperation with the CoR



*Ms Tatiana Badan*

During the EA Group meeting held on 27 January 2021, and upon the invitation by Mr Emil Drăghici, mayor of Vulcana-Băi and president of the Association of Communes of Roma-

nia (ACOR), EA members hosted president of Congress of Local Authorities from Moldova (CALM), Ms Tatiana Badan.

Ms Badan presented local authorities from the Republic of Moldova as the most faithful and stable promoters of European democratic and cultural values, explained, in her words, both by the Romanian cultural identity in this territory and, in recent years, the awareness of the beneficial impact of direct European investments in the development of the country and of local communities.

During her speech, Ms Badan called for greater cooperation with the European Committee of the Regions in promoting local democracy, decentralization and development. "We are confident that EU partner / associated coun-

tries, especially the Republic of Moldova, will benefit significantly from the Committee of the Regions' greater involvement in the complex issues of decentralized cooperation, European programs and funds for local governments, cooperation and development policies, local democracy, autonomy and decentralization," she said.

She also strongly called for the need to recognize and treat local communities from the Republic of Moldova as a complementary part of the Romanian and European value and cultural space and explained that "over 80% of the population of the Republic of Moldova speak Romanian and most have European citizenship: through Romania, Bulgaria, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Italy and others."

## Green Deal: Investments must not harm climate and environmental objectives, says József Kóbor

On 15 February, during the 4th meeting of the Committee of the Regions' Green Deal Working Group, Mr József Kóbor, city councillor of Pecs, Hungary, underlined the need for EU investments to fully meet EU climate and environmental objectives.

"We have to support the decarbonisation process of our regions and cities while ensuring that EU investments and measures enable us to shift to clear sources of energy without undermining our efforts to achieve climate and environmental goals. More decentralisation is necessary to make sure

resources are targeted to the cities and regions' needs," Said Mr Kóbor.

He also stressed that investments in rail should have priority, in the context of the European Year of Rail, including reinstating local and regional routes and historical links.

During the meeting, representatives of the European Commission's DG GROW and DG REGIO outlined respectively the initiatives "Intelligent Cities Challenge", that supports local and regional authorities in developing Local Green Deals, and the "Just Transition Mechanism", a flagship instrument which will provide significant financial support to



*Mr József Kóbor*

the territories and people most exposed by the transition towards climate neutrality.

## Subsidiarity: CoR participation in High level Better Regulation body crucial to improve EU legislation, said Karl Vanlouwe



*Mr Karl Vanlouwe*

On 11 February, Karl Vanlouwe, member of the Flemish Parliament and first vice president of the European Alliance Group took part in the

Committee of the Regions' Subsidiarity Steering Group meeting. At the meeting members discussed the follow up of the Subsidiarity Task Force's recommendations and CoR participation in the High level Group on Better Regulation, Fit for Future Platform which advises the European Commission on efforts to simplify EU laws and reduce related unnecessary costs.

During the discussion, Mr Vanlouwe recalled the important role of regions with legislative powers in the EU decision making process.

"We have to grasp the opportunity of being included in the Fit for Future platform to channel the experience of regions, and make sure

EU legislation is fit for purpose. Many regions hold legislative powers and are autonomous in many respects. In Belgium, for instance Flemish Parliament is on equal footing with the Federal Parliament and this has to be taken into account in EU legislation.

During the meeting, members also discussed the future activities of RegHub, a network of regionally and locally based public officials that evaluates the implementation of EU policies and the 2021 European Commission work programme. The Steering Group identified the priority files that will be scrutinised in relation to their relevance for local and regional authorities from a subsidiarity and proportionality perspective.

## EA group organises a webinar on the PEACE programme on the island of Ireland



"Peace cannot be taken for granted, it is something we need to work with"; "bringing communities together"; "Peace is fragile, it needs repeating, it needs encouragement and it needs the commitment which has been given by the UK and Irish government and strongly supported by the EU". These were some of the views presented by Gina McIntyre the CEO of the Special EU Programmes body in a webinar held by the European Alliance group in the European Committee of the Regions on Wednesday, 24 February. The webinar gathered representatives of local and regional authorities from across the EU, members of the European Parliament as well as representatives of the EU institutions and regional representations in Brussels.

The European Alliance Group President Cllr Kieran McCarthy introduced Ms McIntyre stressing the positive societal and economic benefits the work of healing communities after the Good Friday agreement has brought to the island of Ireland. "In these turbulent times of uncertainty due to BREXIT", he added, "it is worth paying attention to the successes of the PEACE and Interreg programs and what they have achieved in Ireland, Northern Ireland and beyond".

Ms McIntyre's presentation focused on cross-community projects including in theatre, sports, education and sharing public spaces, which all focused on building a spirit which transcends difference of religion or beliefs.

Karl Vanlouwe, a Member of the Flemish Parliament recalled CoR Conference of Presidents' visit to the town of Newry and the border where the only difference he noticed is his Gsm provider switching and the colour on the lines of the road changing. he further expressed hopes that the new deal with the UK will ensure there is never a border on the island.

Concluding the event, Ms McIntyre highlighted that the PEACE + would not only continue to help communities but will also be hugely important to ensure economic and social recovery post COVID19.

The Special EU Programmes Body is a cross-border body in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland which co-ordinates projects funded by the European Union and implemented in Northern Ireland and adjacent regions: the Border region of the Republic of Ireland, and Western Scotland.

The PEACE Programme in Northern Ireland is an EU structural funds programme which aims at reinforcing progress towards a peaceful and stable society, and promoting reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland. The Programme falls under the European Territorial Cooperation goal. In its proposals on the post-2020 cohesion regulations, the Commission has put forward the idea of continuing the PEACE ('PEACE Plus') programme which should be managed in an integrated manner with the UK's contribution being integrated into it as external assigned revenue.

## Maupertuis: Innovative models for sustainable tourism and agriculture on islands are key to counter devastating effects of climate change and preserve economic activities

On 22 February, the Euro Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) plenary took place virtually in the presence of Secretary General of the Union for the Mediterranean Mr Nasser Kamel.

During the meeting, Ms Marie-Antoinette Maupertuis, EA Group vice president and member of the Executive Council of Corsica stressed that negative effects of climate

change are greater on islands like Corsica, where tourism, agriculture and small-scale fisheries sectors, which play a crucial role in the local economy, are under serious threat. "We need to build up on the islands' potential as laboratories for circular economy to devise new innovative models for sustainable tourism and agriculture in order to protect environment and local businesses while ensuring social cohesion", she said.





## Karl Vanlouwe appointed rapporteur on the EU Counter-Terrorism Agenda

During the 6th meeting of the CIVEX commission, held on 16 February, our first vice president and member of the Flemish Parliament, Karl Vanlouwe was appointed rapporteur on the EU Counter-Terrorism Agenda 2020 – 2025.

The Agenda is part of the EU Security Union Strategy for 2020 to 2025 and builds on the

existing measures to deny terrorists the means to carry out attacks and to strengthen resilience against the terrorist threat.

It is shaped around four aims: identifying vulnerabilities and building capacity to anticipate threats; preventing attacks by addressing radicalisation; promoting security by design and reducing vulner-

abilities to protect cities and people; and stepping up operational support, prosecution and victims' rights to better respond to attacks.

Mr Vanlouwe's opinion will be discussed at the CIVEX meeting on 11 May and during the Committee of the Regions' October plenary session.

## Markauskas: EU support has strengthened Lithuanian agriculture, but one does not need to sit on the laurels



Klaipėda District Municipality

Almost 17 years ago, in 2004, Lithuanians supported EU membership in a referendum. It is quite clear today that the decision was right and needed. Positive developments are visible in all areas and regions of the country, as well as in agriculture. The Klaipėda district, of which I am the mayor, alone received almost EUR 300 million from the budget of the European Union and Lithuania during the years.

It has enabled our farmers to modernise their farms, increase their capacity, become competitive and modern. Some dairy farms could robotise the milking process, some were subsidised to purchase new tractors, many others to buy machinery needed to work on the ground. The cultivation of cereals has more than doubled, with some farms reaching as much as 10 tonnes per hectare.

EU support has also contributed significantly to the development of villages. The LEADER programme funded around 40 different projects from rural communities and non-governmental organisations. Public spaces, parks, community houses in Priekulė, Weiviržėnai, Dovilai and many other towns in our district have been constructed and new, non-agricultural jobs have been created in the villages of Broži, Dighai, Dreverna and others.

As a farmer and a former Lithuanian Minister for Agriculture and I am fully aware of this. I must recognise that agriculture, and rural areas in general are still facing many challenges, both in Lithuania and in our neighbourhood. The depopulation due to migration out of rural areas has led to a situ-

ation where more than one third of farmers are over the age of 65 and the average size of farms in the district is just 7, 63 hectares.

I believe that the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy for the period 2020-2027 should contribute to addressing these problems. Farmers in our neighbourhood are well aware of the importance of the Green Deal and biodiversity for the future of Europe and the world. But to do that, it is necessary to put in place financial instruments and ensure proper consultation of farmers and rural populations.

We cannot run the risk of Europe becoming dependent on food imports from third countries, the EU must remain an exporter of agricultural products. I also do not agree with the cuts in the Cohesion Fund as the lack of development of civil engineering infrastructure in rural areas makes these areas unattractive to investors.



Mr Bronius Markauskas